
The Survival of the Iraqi State

A CONVERSATION WITH MINA AL-ORAIBI

FLETCHER FORUM: *You've spoken and written about the evolution of the state system in general; how would you apply this evolution to the Iraqi state, especially as affects external and internal state sovereignty?*

MINA AL-ORAIBI: This is an interesting moment for all countries, as state structure is changing. People feel the need to be a part of regional bodies, especially when it comes to economic issues, because strength comes through being part of a unified economy. At the same time, we're living in an era where people have access to information, ideas, and self-expression; self-determination is at its height. The question is how this access to ideas and that need to belong will impact different states.

Iraq is coming to this question out of a period of dictatorship, sanctions, being cut off from the world, which meant it was largely not part of these international conversations. Iraq was almost like a black hole. There was no internet, no satellite phones, it was cut off from 1990 to 2003. The one part of Iraq that actually did have a window into the international conversation was the Kurdistan Region. After 1991 you had the intifada, with fourteen of Iraq's eighteen provinces rising up against Saddam Hussein, but it was only Kurdistan that got an international safe haven, that was allowed to forge its path outside of the shadow of Saddam's dictatorship. Fast

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..... through war, through invasion, through a complete vacuum even before the invasion, which required the United States to lead a coalition and very quickly start making decisions. Take this in sharp contrast to the recent conversation in the UK about Scotland; they had a referendum, a drawn-out political process, campaigns. None of this happened. Iraq was thrown into this. And that was a missed opportunity. The situation was a blank canvas. That isn't to say that it was right for the U.S. and coalition to take apart the army or the police or dismantle state structures, but those actions could have provided the opportunity to create new state structures. It's a lost opportunity for Iraq and the whole Middle East. The restructuring of the Iraqi state could have set a precedent for how you agree on what you want your state to look like. Instead, we've seen twelve years of a political system that is fragmented and therefore negatively impacting the state.

One piece of the system is the Kurdish North, semi-autonomous from 1991, which had and continues to have its own internal political discussions. Although there are major ongoing issues with how the presidency of the Kurdish region is decided and problems of patronage, there is a relatively stable political system. Within this system, the Kurdish leadership of the two main parties say that, given the chance, they would have independence. This independence would mean changing the borders, changing the state—and the Kurdish leadership says this will happen when the time is opportune. Nobody has yet to explain what that means. My reading of it, however, is that the time becomes opportune when the Iraqi state is weak and when greater regional dynamics allow for independence to happen. But I also think that a wise Kurdish leadership equally values a stable Iraq. This might lead to contradiction in some of the Kurdish leadership's statements, but in general the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) has tried to encourage a stable, functioning Iraqi state. However, we still see issues of identity: what does it mean when you are an Iraqi Kurdish citizen at this moment? You're feeling less attachment to Baghdad because all your decisions are being made in Erbil, and so that's where you look toward. That's just one part of a complicated equation.

The other part is everyone else in Iraq. Quite often, and wrongly, people say that removing Kurdistan leaves just the Sunni and the Shi'a in Iraq. First of all, being Kurdish is an ethnicity and being Sunni or Shi'a is a sect, which makes that comparison incorrect. Secondly, this excludes straight-away people who view themselves as being secular Iraqis, or Christians, or Yazidis, or Shabak, or Assyrians, or Turkmens—and the list goes on and on in Iraq. By looking at just these three clusters of Kurdish, Sunni, and Shi'a, we break up the Iraqi identity and what it means to be a part of Iraq, because Iraq is meant to be a mosaic.

Some people call this a romantic view. I don't think it's romantic. I think it's based in history: a pride in the heritage of the Mesopotamians, the Sumerians, Akkadians and beyond. Consider what it means that Iraq was home to the law of Hammurabi, and that when people speak about any legal matters, they have to go back to Hammurabi's era. I think there is a strong historical identity in that mosaic, not romanticism.

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Granted, what happens in Iraq affects our view of this identity. Talk about historical identity to somebody who has just lost a family member to a suicide bombing, or to somebody who can't get medicine when their child is at the Basra cancer hospital, and that person may say, "I really feel no affinity to these historical moments." Again, Iraq is a country that's gone through dictatorship, sanctions, wars of various kinds—and we're not even talking about the Iran-Iraq war and the collective tragedy of those eight years. In light of this, these historical significances, these identities get thrown away. You begin to say, how can I protect myself, and how can I protect my family? If you live in an area where the government doesn't provide law and policing—and this happened in many provinces that happen to be home to a Sunni majority—you line up with a gang leader because that's the way to protect yourself. That has nothing to do with your religious identity. We see that also happening in Syria: so many people who genuinely don't have a political or religious allegiance either way still had to just align with local militants to protect them and their family, and then these militant leaders will boast, "Look, 10,000 people have just pledged their allegiance to me." It's not about pledging allegiance, it's about who's going to protect you. When you stabilize a country and provide that protection, however, the real questions of citizen and state identities flood back in, because they've been there all along. I think state structure

in Iraq is less about theories of sovereignty and more about the practicalities. We have a constitution that is flawed because several articles have been

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seriously breached. In a codified constitution, once one article is violated and nullified, it is as if the whole document is nullified. In another practicality, we had a whole discussion about the Iraqi flag. Most people don't really feel affinity to this flag, partly because of what's remained on it; the writing of "Allahu Akbar," with due respect to what that says, means that the flag has an Islamic element. At the same time, many people say that "Allahu Akbar" is

actually written in Saddam Hussein's handwriting, and that it was part of his attempt in the 1990s to add an Islamist tinge to his regime. But it was an imposition, and nobody bought it. In any case, when the new leadership post-2003 came to change the flag, they took away the three stars, and they kept "Allahu Akbar."

On another note, Iraq was a country that always had a national day, although its meaning changed with whoever came into power. Such symbols become part of the state; they are moments of a nation coming together. For example, Veterans Day in the United States, regardless of what you think about U.S. wars, is a moment of respect and coming together. We don't have a national day now in Iraq. We do have Army Day—one of the few non-religious national holidays that has remained—but it's become very contentious. People don't even know if they can believe in the army anymore.

FLETCHER FORUM: *On the subject of the army, which certainly is contentious, could you comment on the tensions and rivalries between the Iraqi Security Forces and rival militias? Specifically, what are your thoughts on the monopoly on arms and the contested control of the Iraqi army?*

AL-ORAIBI: There are rivalries between the Iraqi Security Forces and the militias, and these militias come in different shapes and sizes. At the moment, there are these Popular Mobilization Units that came about after The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). People see them as a vehicle for those who wanted to volunteer to fight ISIL. Looking at volunteers for these units, many Iraqis question, "Why didn't that volunteer go

through the army? If you want to volunteer and pick up arms to defend your country, why wouldn't you go to your military?" Choosing to go to the militias instead of the army means you're further enabling a parallel structure that has existed for several years now. These militias are not from 2014 and the fight against ISIL; they came into being after the events of 2003. Some say that the U.S. army allowed the militias because they in turn relied on contractors for the U.S. army, they could act as an independent force. Some militias, however, were part of political parties that were active in the Iraqi opposition pre-2003. Several of them had soldiers active in Iran. Many Iraqis saw Iran as an enemy during those eight years of war, and suddenly in 2003, the new political parties brought in these militias trained in Iran.

Then you have the militias that arose because people needed to protect their areas. The Mahdi Army
 is one of these. The Mahdi Army of
 course answers to Muqtadar al-Sadr,
 who is seen as an Iraqi nationalist,
 even if you don't agree with him. Even
 though he is a religious cleric, he speaks
 with this Iraqi tone, emphasizing Iraq
 over sectarian divides: for example, he
 doesn't say that Islamist Shi'a leaders should naturally lean towards Iran. The Mahdi Army illustrates that there are different shades of what it means to be an Islamist or Shi'a, and what these shades mean for the militias that answer to you.

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Then you have the militias that are basically extremists, like Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq. Qais AlKhaz'ali, who leads them, is well-known and wanted for crimes that have been definitively tied to his men. Now, he's part of this popular mobilization movement that has been given legitimacy. Such groups would never have gotten legitimacy through the state structures. Then you have, of course, ISIL, and other armed gangs and groups who are against the government. Some people call them an insurgency, some people call them terrorists; they morph into different groupings depending on the politics of the current administration. Quite often they're also bandits who used to stop people and rob them on the way in Iraq from Jordan or Syria.

Then you have the Iraqi Security Forces. I feel a real sadness when the Iraqi army is raised in conversation, because people speak of them as though they were traitors to their country, and that's not fair. At the end of the day, the soldiers of the Iraqi army were let down by their commanders. Mosul fell not because of the soldiers of the Iraqi army, but because the

commanders refused to give the order to fight, and they themselves fled. No army in the world would continue to fight if its commanders flee. To expect that of the Iraqi army, which has gone through so much, is plain unfair.

I think there's this competition for resources and funding for the Iraqi budget. The militias get funding from Iraqi budget, and then the

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..... Iraqi army has to fight for funding. In addition to this, there's competition between the Iraqi army and the Peshmerga, the Kurdish forces. Now people say, "Okay, we can trust the Peshmerga," because they have a strict commander structure. Some countries like Germany even decided to fund the Peshmerga directly. What impact does

this have on the Iraqi Security Forces? These are all issues to consider when weighing up the Iraqi armed forces.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Can you envision the Peshmerga beginning to push out from non-Kurdish areas? For example, if the liberation of Mosul was a possibility, do you think the Peshmerga might participate?*

AL-ORAIBI: Certain areas in Iraq are considered disputed territories. They could be Kurdish, could be Arab. Personally, I think if you are really invested in the country, you say these are local municipalities and that they should rule themselves, rather than trying to impose control from one side or the other. But that's wishful thinking at this point. Also, certain territories that were never disputed are now being claimed to be disputed, so I see this as a form of encroachment. But this isn't happening because of the Peshmerga; these are political decisions being made. I have a lot of respect for the Peshmerga fighters: they fight with honor, and they fight according to the commands they are given by their political leaders.

Do I fear that there are political ambitions from the Kurdish regional government to expand? Yes, I think this was shown in Kirkuk. In Kirkuk, there was the threat of ISIL, and then the Iraqi army just withdrew, and no one understood how or why this happened, or who in the leadership of the Iraqi army allowed this to happen. Then, overnight the Peshmerga move to take Kirkuk. The Peshmerga wouldn't move on their own, so they were given a command. While I don't have fears about the Peshmerga themselves, but I think the ambitions of the KRG allowed the events in Kirkuk to happen.

When we look at Mosul, Kurds have lived in Nineveh Governorate and its capital Mosul for centuries, and traditionally the relationships between different groupings in Mosul are good. What's happening now, however, is this political tension. I don't think there are fears of the Peshmerga, or the Kurds, moving in unilaterally, or taking out "revenge" attacks on the residents of Mosul in the event that they do. There's much more fear that some of the irregular militias will do that. Not that people fear them on an individual level, but there's a fear of what it means for some of the extremist Shi'a militias to come in, and of whether they will be given the command to withdraw or not.

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FLETCHER FORUM: *So many of these issues have a political dimension. Turning to issues of military reformation, you spoke briefly about Prime Minister Abadi currently being in a weak position to enact reforms. Do you think the necessary military reforms are possible for Abadi's government—or at all—at this time?*

AL-ORAIBI: I think it's taken way too long and reforms should have happened already. Where are we now? Domestically, Abadi is in a weak state. Internationally, we saw a lack of interest in Iraq after the United States had withdrawn its troops in 2012; the perception in the international community was that that Iraq was no longer its problem. After ISIL emerged in 2014 as a strong force, attention again returned to Iraq. Although Abadi currently has a lot of international support, based on a need to confront ISIL, that support has also begun to wane.

Abadi still has support from the international community he may otherwise not get, but he is faced with a difficult task: trying to strengthen the Iraqi army at a time when Iran has huge influence over the parallel-structure militias. Similarly, Abadi must deal with former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki; while no longer in office, al-Maliki wields a lot of influence in Iraq and knows he can do it through some of these militias. These are the demons Abadi has to fight.

I think it is possible, however, for Abadi to enact reforms now, because there is an international interest in supporting the Iraqi army. Will Abadi be able to bring in former Iraqi army generals who are sitting in Istanbul, or Amman, or Erbil? Can the Iraqi army win over former soldiers

and support current ones? What the Iraqi army needs is professionalism. We need generals with proven combat successes, regardless of their sect or ethnicity.

The time is now. We can't wait for Abadi to get stronger, because Abadi is not going to get stronger unless some of these reforms happen.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Moving outward to regional dynamics, how would other states in the region react to a disintegrated Iraq—that is, if we did see Iraq fractured into several smaller states or regions? How, specifically, might Iran react?*

AL-ORAIBI: This would be a threat for Iran, actually. Let's not forget that Iran is made up of a multitude of minorities that would actually be bigger than some majorities in the region. Iran would look at what this minority composition means. People naturally consider the Kurdish question—what the breakup of Iraq would mean for Kurds in Iran—but this question is relevant for other ethnicities too. If you open Pandora's box by dividing countries along these minority or ethnicity lines, then the stability of the entire region is up in the air.

Second, I think that if Iraq were to separate into smaller regions, then Iran would very much impose its will not only on the Shia parts of Iraq, but also on the sects and ethnicities that it believes are connected to Iran. Many Shia would refuse that; you already see this with some of the Shia in Iraq who feel their identity is not Persian or Iranian. You would have some struggle. There is of course the historical struggle between Qom in Iran and Najaf in Iraq over which place is seen as the center of a religious authority, and we would see the impact of Iranian influence in that struggle. I think that would be very bad for Islam, since Muslims in general would not want to see Najaf put in a position of weakness.

Further, I don't see a sectarian or ethnic breakup happening, because it would mean that Syria would also have to be divided along those lines. Some say that Syria will never be united again as it was, which I can see and understand, but that doesn't mean that Syria will be broken up just along these sectarian lines. What is the impact of Syria, then, on the Iraqi situation? Syria is strategically important for Iran, and Iran would play a role in shaping the Syrian dynamic.

Also, the Kurds of Iran have a huge interest in and relationships with the Kurdish areas of Iraq, and I think they would want to use their leverage in Iraq in this state of limbo. The Kurdish position could be manipulated and used in the event of Iraqi state fragmentation.

FLETCHER FORUM: *What do you think might be the tipping point or catalyst that would push Iraq out of the limbo state you reference, either one way or another?*

AL-ORAIBI: It's difficult to say, because you never know what would happen. One concern would be if you had a huge security threat on the centers of power in Iraq, or an attack on the parliament or on the prime minister, specifically. Not that people haven't tried this, but if the threat were a concerted, continuous effort, that would be a big concern. Or, if Syria is split up and disintegrated, this would have a knock-on effect in Iraq, because a fragmented Syria wouldn't be viable without absorbing some parts of Iraq. Or, if the Kurdish region decided to unilaterally declare independence, that would also push Iraq out of a state of limbo. That is not to say that the outcome of these things would necessarily be negative or positive, but it would give answer to some of these questions that continue to be asked. I don't know what the net impact would be, but it would be sad for Iraq, because Iraq is richer for the mosaic that it is. For example, on the Kurdish question, many Kurds have an allegiance to identities with multiple roots, not just allegiance to a single Kurdish identity. We will see. All of these possibilities are there.

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On a clearly positive front, another thing that could push Iraq out of this limbo would be military successes on the ground that are quickly followed up with good governance. If you immediately see one of the cities being liberated and then quickly reinstating running services, renovating schools and hospitals, electing a local governor who's very in touch with his or her people, and generally moving forward, that's a positive dynamic. Iraq has all these really strong resources for a brighter future: not just financial resources, not just people on the ground, but a strategic position and value. Everybody has a stake in Iraq being strong. If we can achieve that dynamic, I think we could see a reversal in the way Iraq is trending now. We started to see that positive change in 2010 and 2011 before all the ugly politics got in the way.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Speaking of positive change and those liberated areas, people have returned to areas cleared of ISIL, but those areas are often lacking the infrastructure and resources they used to have. Demographics are shifting, too, because of this. What does return look like for a post-ISIL Iraq?*

AL-ORAIBI: To be honest, everything I'm aware of is through others' reporting, so this is not from direct experience. However, based on reporting, UN reports, and government officials that I've spoken to, those areas are experiencing exactly what you described, a complete breakdown in infrastructure. Some of these cities were already in complete chaos after the 2003 war, and during Saddam's time, under the sanctions, infrastructure was in a terrible state. So infrastructure that was already weak is now completely destroyed.

How do you rebuild these cities when Iraq continues to say it's bankrupt? The shortage of money is partly because of oil: the Iraqi budget was put in place when the price of oil was USD 110 per barrel, and now it's somewhere around USD 38.

Still, the fact that people feel safe enough to go back is important. The fact that they feel they have a future is important. Quite often now, people are going back because they don't have many other choices—but,

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at the same time, people have risked their lives to get out of Iraq, and so choosing to go back is important. In Tikrit, the number of people who have gone back is around 15,000, as tracked by international organizations. It's no small number. People are going back in dire straits, but it could still be an opportunity if there is good policing, security, and then rebuilding of infrastructure. If we don't seize that opportunity,

though, another armed group could take over. At the moment, this is what characterizes return: a risk, a potential positive move, and a potential opportunity for the government to prove that it can govern.

FLETCHER FORUM: *That brings us full circle to the issues of trust and governance you highlighted earlier—for example, rebuilding the trust of the military and working to combat corruption. What initial mechanisms could you identify that would help the government regain the trust of the Iraqi people?*

AL-ORAIBI: Service delivery is key. That includes everything from providing electricity to providing security to providing education. Health care is important; specifically, issues like immunizing children and making sure you don't have outbreaks of diseases we got rid of decades ago. At the moment, Iraq has over 2,000 cases of cholera. You can regain trust in your government when you see that that it is not relying on international organizations to save the day, but
 functioning on its own day-to-day, and
 making sure there are vaccines available
 in hospitals for children.

All these steps are tangible and doable. The breakdown in trust is happening partly because of corruption, partly because of a lack of capacity, partly because of the security situation. To go back to health care, it's even hard to make sure that the people giving the vaccines are being protected. Still, there are tangible ways of providing protection and services. I believe you can win trust by showing competence, and win legitimacy through competence.

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FLETCHER FORUM: *Thank you. f*